

A Torah of Trauma: Rav Shagar and the Yom Kippur War

When the Syrian and Egyptian armies invaded at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, they found Israel vastly unprepared for the attack. Israeli troops at the borders were quickly overcome, and the enemy pressed its advantage, advancing far quicker than anyone thought possible. In response, massive numbers of reservists were called up to reinforce Israel's defenses, most having no idea what awaited them. At the time, Rav Shagar (R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, 1949–2007) was a recently married Kollel student at Yeshivat HaKotel, where he would later go on to serve as a teacher and interim Rosh Yeshiva. He received his orders soon after Yom Kippur ended and quickly arrived at his designated military base, only to find it in disarray. Soldiers were being sent to the front with only the vaguest orders. Shagar and his two tankmates, whom he had known for some time, rushed to prepare and were eventually sent to the Golan Heights as part of the efforts to arrest the Syrian advance.

Somewhere near Rosh Pina they saw dozens of people standing by the road waving at them, trying to get the young soldiers' attention. Knowing it was likely they had not eaten in the rush to war, they threw apples to them. Immediately, a spirited halakhic debate arose between Shagar's tankmates, Shaya and Shmuel, about the halakhic status of the fruit. With Rosh Hashana just ten days before, the *shemitta* year had only just ended. While some may have seen the focus on halakhic minutiae as out of place given the circumstances, Shagar felt differently. In his eyes, his friends' conversation reflected a "profound *devekut*."¹ Even as they headed off to battle and perhaps even death, their love of Torah knew no bounds.

Within hours, if not minutes, they arrived at the battle of Nafah Quarry, where they faced an onslaught of Syrian tanks. As soon as they entered the field of combat, their tank was hit by enemy fire, killing both Shaya and Shmuel. Shagar somehow managed to free himself from the flaming

1 Rav Shagar, *Ba-Yom ha-Hu: Derashot u-Ma'amarim le-Mo'adei Iyar* (Shagar Institute, 2012), 106. This article draws its description of the events from Shagar's essay in that book, "*Zakharti Hesed Ne'urayikh*."

wreckage but was severely injured. Left in total shock, he was barely able to hide until later rescued and flown to Maimonides Hospital.² A few days later, his close friend and longtime *havruta*, R. Yair Dreyfuss, would visit him there. Covered in burns and wrapped in bandages, Dreyfuss barely recognized his dear friend, but one thing stood out. Shagar told him in no uncertain terms, “The battlefield is not like it is in songs.”³

Over the next few weeks of fighting, the Syrian and Egyptian armies would be repelled, but the damage to Israel had already been done. Thousands of soldiers were dead, nearly five times as many were injured, and hundreds remained captured in enemy hands. The miraculous victory of the Six Day War had ushered in a euphoric belief in Israel’s invincibility, but the Yom Kippur War had tragically proved it to be false. The army and government had been unprepared for the war, and the soldiers sent to the front, like Shagar, had paid the price. If the defining moment of the Six Day War was the sounding of the *shofar* at the Kotel, heralding redemption, the defining moment of the Yom Kippur War was the wail of air raid sirens on Judaism’s holiest day, signaling that Israel stood at the abyss. As the poet Haim Gouri later put it, the sirens on Yom Kippur were not a call to arms but the cry of “an existential threat,” that announced a return of “Jewish existential fear . . . which the Land of Israel evidently did not exempt us from . . . of life on the verge of being ended.”⁴ At the war’s end, Israeli society did not yet have the language to describe what had taken place, but over the decades, it became clear that the most appropriate word was trauma. Both the soldiers who returned from battle and Israeli society as a whole were traumatized by the events of the war, and the effects have been felt ever since.

The Traumas of War

Derived from the Greek meaning wound, trauma has come to describe not only injuries to our bodies but to our psyches as well. In the wake of World War I, Sigmund Freud was one of the first to document that many soldiers remained haunted by their experiences. Even those who returned from combat uninjured were consumed by memories of what they had been through. They felt compelled to return to their war

2 Shagar was rescued from the battlefield by R. Yaakov Medan, who would go on to become the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion. Shagar and Medan were well-known for their embrace of creative approaches to Torah study, but often differed in their religious outlook towards political questions. A dialogue between them about the meaning of the Second Intifada can be found in *Beriti Shalom* (Yediot Books, 2020), 108–119.

3 Yair Dreyfuss, *Negi’ot bi-Sfat ha-Lev* (Yediot Books, 2013), 159.

4 Yoram Meltzer, “Haim Gouri Tells About the Yom Kippur War” [Hebrew], *HaSafranim Blog* (November 3, 2020), available at <https://blog.nli.org.il/haim-guri-kipuur-war>.

experiences, especially in their dreams, despite every effort to move on with their lives. According to Freud, this phenomenon, what we now refer to as PTSD, resulted from traumatic experiences that caused excessive stimulation leading to overloading the psyche.⁵ War, of course, is full of such things, for it means facing unimaginable horrors such as the taking of human lives, the gruesome death of one's friends, the maiming of one's own body, or the prospect of one's own death. Traumatic experiences like these seemed to leave a permanent mark on the psyche and elude our ability to easily make sense of them.

Because of its intensity, trauma demands a response, and as Freud noted time and again, the most common one is repression. Rather than confront it directly, those who undergo trauma do all they can to resist engaging with their pain. It is common for those who experience trauma to search for a scapegoat who can be held accountable, and whose punishment can be viewed as potentially putting things right. This applies not only to individuals but to societies as well, where the search for a scapegoat often manifests in the political realm. Yet, finding one rarely achieves the desired results, which Israel's response to the Yom Kippur War makes clear. As the shock of the war rippled through Israeli society, fierce protests emerged against the government's handling of the war. Many were led by those who had fought in the war and seen their friends die. In response, the government established the Agranat Commission to examine the handling of the war. It eventually concluded that the highest echelons of the army and government must be held responsible for Israel's lack of preparedness, intelligence failures, and mismanagement of the conflict. Several senior army officers were dismissed, and the ensuing controversy forced Golda Meir to resign as prime minister. While laudatory that Israel was able to scrutinize its failings, it soon became clear that the conclusions of the Agranat Commission satisfied no one. The army's aura was left in shambles, and in just a few years, the Labor Party's political hegemony, which had been supreme since the founding of the state, would come to an end. For many Israelis, the traumas of the war brought an end to Zionism's innocence, and Israel would never be quite the same.

Don't Worry, Redemption is Coming

If the Yom Kippur War was a transformational event for much of Israeli society, the reaction within the Religious Zionist community appeared far more muted. To understand why requires recognizing trauma not merely

5 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Stratchey, vol. 18 (London, 1955), 29.

as a political problem but a theological one as well. Religion's greatest strength may be that it offers a way to make sense of trauma by placing it in a larger framework of meaning. If it can be explained as a punishment for sin, it no longer is felt to be arbitrary and senseless, and even if no sin can be found, it can still be understood as a necessary part of God's plan, albeit inscrutable in the here and now. Religion not only seeks to explain trauma, but also holds out the promise that all traumas can be rectified. Though one may suffer in this world, being a loyal servant of God means one can expect to receive their just reward in the World to Come. One might not even have to wait that long, for when the messiah comes, all earthly suffering will be transformed into salvation. From a certain religious perspective, trauma is at worst a passing phenomenon. It may be painful in the moment, but it is only a matter of time until it is eventually redeemed.

While many secular Israelis saw the war as a tragic mistake that led to unnecessary loss of life, Religious Zionism would take a different view. With the victory of the Six Day War just a few years earlier, messianic anticipation had been rampant. The Jewish people's return to the Land of Israel had placed them on the path to redemption, and the Yom Kippur War was understood through this narrative. This perspective was powerfully expressed by Rabbi Yehuda Amital at the time of the war. He argued that Syria and Egypt's attack should not be viewed as a regional conflict but as a religious war between those chosen by God and those who oppose Him. Choosing to attack on Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, revealed the conflict's spiritual dimensions. Syria and Egypt's defeat was not only a victory for Israel but for God Himself as well because the Jewish people represent the divine idea in the world.⁶

Despite the significant losses incurred, R. Amital felt the war only served to confirm the messianic narrative laid out by R. Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook. It was R. Amital's hope that Israel's victory would finally compel all of Religious Zionism to fully embrace a Zionism of redemption. Rather than see the war as caused by the government or army's negligence, it was to be viewed as the inescapable outcome of being God's chosen people. Because of the Jews' unique mission, some nations will see Israel as a threat, and therefore, the Jewish people will constantly be called upon to defend themselves.

6 For R. Amital's perspective in 1973 see the chapter from his *Ha-Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* elsewhere in this issue, and Yehudah Mirsky's accompanying essay. For the most comprehensive review to date of Religious Zionism's response to the war, including that of R. Amital and Rav Shagar, see Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, *Me-Metziut le-Safa: Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit ve-Milhemet Yom ha-Kippurim* (Carmel, 2023), reviewed by Shlomo Fischer in this issue as well.

For R. Amital, there was no need whatsoever to confront the horrors of the war or the failures of the state that may have caused them. Though the war brought death and destruction, the Jewish people could remain absolutely confident that the long hoped for messianic future was just ahead. Yet, while this approach may sound inspiring, it should be viewed with some caution. Jews yearn for redemption, but it is not hard to see how this yearning can be used to avoid confronting trauma and thereby serves as a form of repression. In the years following the war, Religious Zionism would channel its messianic enthusiasm into the establishment of the Gush Emunim movement and the settlement-building enterprise. Whatever problems the war had raised, many in Religious Zionism felt they could be avoided through further dedication to the eschatological vision of Greater Israel.

Faith Mixed with Darkness

Though some religious soldiers may have aligned themselves with R. Amital's perspective, Rav Shagar was most certainly not among them.⁷ Rather than see the war as a confirmation of his beliefs, the trauma he experienced caused him to reevaluate his religious worldview. Ten years after the war, at a gathering of soldiers who had gone on to teach in *yeshivot hesder*, he offered the following reflection:

In relation to the Yom Kippur War—on the one hand, the things, the events, everything that happened brings a lot of faith to everyone who feels such things. But my faith, as I feel it, is not always a clear faith. What this means is that there is shadow in it, there is darkness in it, there are perplexities in it.⁸

While others may have emerged unscathed from the war, Rav Shagar found that it cast a dark shadow on his life. Those who follow the teachings of Rav Kook see faith as a brilliant light that illuminates all of existence, but Rav Shagar processed his experiences quite differently.⁹ His friends' tragic deaths caused him to realize that faith does not always

7 It should be noted that R. Amital and Rav Shagar, 25 years his junior, would go on to develop a personal relationship; R. Amital spoke at the special gathering convened by Shagar's students when he was close to death. In the speech he compared Shagar to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir, whose teachings were profound but not fully understood by his contemporaries. See Elhanan Nir, "Be-Tzel ha-Emuna," *Makor Rishon* (June 18, 2017).

8 "Hodayat Asor," *Kotleinu* 11 (1984), 155.

9 Though Shagar disagreed with R. Kook on many key issues, he still saw himself as following in R. Kook's path. For more on the similarity between the two, see Zachary Truboff, *Torah Goes Forth From Zion: Essays on the Thought of Rav Kook and Rav Shagar* (Torat Emet, 2022).

shine as brightly as we may like. Sometimes, it is mixed with darkness. When urged to hold a *se'udat hoda'a* (a meal of thanks) to celebrate surviving the war, he explained that though he wished to, he was unable. Not due to a lack of faith and gratitude, and “Not because, God forbid, I reject the good I experienced—rather ‘How can we sing a song to God?’ [Psalms 137:4]. I am not capable of doing this. Am I to have a *se'udat hodaya*? What about my friends who did not merit to do so?”¹⁰ That his life continued while Shaya and Shmuel's were cut short caused him lifelong anguish. Their deaths weighed heavily upon him, and the result was that Religious Zionism's simple narrative of exile and redemption no longer made sense to him as it once did.

Few would have dared to voice such doubts publicly, but at that same gathering of soldiers, Rav Shagar confessed that his experiences raised hard questions.

When we think about it [the war], it raises questions [concerning] our entire ideology, I mean the Religious Zionist ideology. I think there is a big question mark on this whole issue, and that people haven't dug deep, they haven't contemplated, they haven't grasped the answers to the shadow which hovers over faith.¹¹

A redemption narrative can solve many problems, but only if one is willing to look away from trauma. However, as Rav Shagar later argues, this is not the way a Jew should act—as demonstrated by Moses. When Moses first confronts Pharaoh with the word of God and demands the liberation of the Jewish people, Pharaoh refuses to listen and cruelly inflicts further suffering upon the Israelite slaves. As a result, people direct their anger at Moses, making clear that God should punish *him* for his role in their predicament. After confronting the traumatic suffering of the people, Moses turns to God and questions all that has occurred:

O my Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people (Exodus 5:22–23).

According to Rav Shagar, Moses' words reflect not passing frustration but a real crisis of faith that “occurs to every true believer.”

Every person who aspires to true goals sometimes sees reality slap him or her in the face, contradicting their faith and their goals. This is a sign of true faith. Faith that never can fail is suspect,

10 Rav Shagar, *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 107.

11 “*Hodayat Asor*,” 155.

because it is a faith that does not try to grapple with actual reality. It doesn't try to bring itself to expression in everyday life. For one whose faith is not real for him, it can never fail; for the one who grapples with reality, he will lose faith in his mission and abilities many times. This also happened to Moses our teacher.¹²

All those who desire a better world and strive to make it possible will inevitably encounter moments that challenge their faith. To raise questions and experience doubt, Rav Shagar argues, does not mean one's faith is flawed but shows that it is real. Faith which cannot make a space for trauma can only sustain itself through repression and often in a violent manner. Shagar describes this exact phenomenon through an account of a symposium he once attended, which left him greatly unsettled. One of the presenters shared that in a previous forum he had ejected a speaker who questioned whether the Jewish State could possibly end in destruction like the first and second Temples. According to Rav Shagar, "The presenter used this story to praise the certainty of faith."¹³ Rav Shagar, however, "was terrified." To avoid encountering the possibility of trauma, he had embraced messianism and made "an idol out of faith."¹⁴

On this point, Rav Shagar's critique of faith fueled by messianism echoes Freud's description of religion as an illusion and even a fetish. "Illusions," Freud notes, "need not necessarily be false."¹⁵ However, one believes an illusion because one *wants it to be true* and not because one knows it to be true. Illusions can only be sustained through "a disavowal of reality."¹⁶ If our knowledge or experience of the world contradicts our religious belief then they must be in error. Under these conditions, Freud explains, faith is treated as a fetish, an idolatrous object one clings to in order to ward off the anxiety of living in a world overrun by so much pain, suffering, and trauma.¹⁷

After the war, much of Rav Shagar's efforts were dedicating to showing that faith can make a space for trauma. To show this, he pointed to Moses' words as interpreted by Rabbi Akiva. According to R. Akiva, what Moses really meant when he challenged God was, "I know that You [God] will eventually redeem the Jewish people, but what do you care about

12 Rav Shagar, *Panekha Avakesh* (Shagar Institute, 2008), 99.

13 Rav Shagar, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 1 (Shagar Institute, 2012), 269–270.

14 Ibid.

15 Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Stratchey, Vol. 21 (London, 1955), 31.

16 Ibid., 43.

17 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Stratchey, vol. 21 (London, 1955), 152–158.

those stuck underneath a building?”¹⁸ In facing the Jewish people’s suffering, Moses did not lose faith in redemption, but Pharaoh’s rejection revealed a dark truth. Not every Jew will make it out of Egypt. Some will perish long before they cross the Red Sea. As R. Akiva understands it, Moses’ faith must acknowledge a reality of pain and suffering that cannot be denied. For R. Akiva, Rav Shagar argues, this interpretation was not just theoretical but personal. After proclaiming Bar Kochba to be the messiah, he lived to see the Romans crush the revolt and slaughter tens of thousands of Jews. Like Moses, he was forced to confront the tragic loss of life incurred by redemption’s delay while still not giving up hope in its eventual arrival. Though left unstated, it appears Rav Shagar felt the same as well. Though redemption eventually will come for the Jewish people, what of Shaya and Shmuel, who died in the burning wreckage of the tank?

The Void: Questions without Answers

To find a religious language that could give voice to what he had experienced, Rav Shagar would eventually turn to Rabbi Nahman of Breslov’s teachings about the Void (*halal ha-panui*).¹⁹ Based on the Lurianic creation myth, R. Nahman explains that God faced a profound dilemma when He desired to create the universe. Because God was *Ein Sof* (infinite light without end) there was no space for anything else. Therefore, the first act was to create not something but *nothing*, and He achieved this through *tzimtzum* (contraction) that created a Void in which the world could come to be.²⁰ However, the Void presents a problem of its own, a theological paradox of sorts. Its existence implies there is space empty of God even though such a thing should not be possible because “there can be nothing apart from His essence.” For R. Nahman, the existence of the Void is not just a theological puzzle but has profound consequences for religious

18 *Shemot Rabba* 5:22.

19 For an overview of why Rav Shagar saw R. Nahman’s writings as important, see *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 2, 467–478. For additional examples of Shagar’s use of the Void, see “Justice and Ethics in a Postmodern World,” and “Living with Nothingness,” in Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* (Maggid, 2017).

20 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:1. Rav Shagar’s use of the Void is best understood through a psychoanalytic lens, as will be made clear. It is rooted not in a general sense of meaninglessness that pervades modern life, as suggested by scholars of Jewish mysticism, such as Joseph Weiss and Gershom Scholem, but in the personal experience of trauma that tears a hole in the fabric of religious life. An interpretation of R. Nahman’s notion of the Void that sees it as emerging from trauma can be found in Haviva Pedaya, “Trauma, Crisis and Repair in Nahman of Braslav,” in *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Classical Texts, Contemporary Reflections*, ed. Lawrence Fine, Eitan Fishbane, and Or Rose (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 171–182.

life. While many religious questions have answers, the existence of the Void stands to remind us that some questions must remain without them.

As R. Nahman goes on to make clear, the questions that emerge from the Void are most often associated with trauma. He cites the Gemara that while on Mount Sinai, Moses was shown a vision of R. Akiva's brutal death at the hand of the Romans and questions the Almighty: "Is this Torah and its reward?" God responds by telling him he must remain silent, for even Moses must accept the immutable reality of the Void.

After the trauma of the war, Rav Shagar was plagued by his own questions without answers. As R. Dreyfus explains, he "lived with the awareness that his survival and the death of his friends was not the result of divine providence, but rather was a coincidence, a random event, a consequence of the Void."²¹

The child of Holocaust survivors, Rav Shagar saw the Void not only in the war but in the Shoah as well. His parents never spoke of their experiences and instead, "they lived their lives with a stubborn muteness that hid that for which there was no repair."²² This is perhaps not surprising, for R. Nahman explains that language always fails in the face of the Void, because it is a place where "there is no spoken word or intellect."²³ Though the Shoah is often described as evil, language can grasp things that are evil and name them as such. However, the Shoah's horrors were so extreme that "evil" cannot fully describe them. Without language to express what they had experienced, Shagar's parents were condemned to "live their lives in the Void opened up by the Shoah."²⁴ In turn, Rav Shagar felt his parents' traumas as his own, like an inherited disease passed down from generation to the next, and he describes it in poetic language:

For me, the Holocaust is a black hole of existing non-existence; a horror illuminated by the midday sunlight; it is an atrocity able to negate everything; it occurred in a world that continues to spin on its axis This is a reality that leads to being stuck, without the ability to escape and without the ability to disappear.²⁵

21 *Negot bi-Sfat ha-Lev*, 163.

22 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 64. Language transforming the mute pain of trauma into suffering is a major theme in R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 55–72. In it he also attests to the phenomenon of concentration camp inmates who lost their very ability to speak.

23 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:3.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.* In this essay, Shagar also draws on Jean-François Lyotard's idea of the *differend*, which describes those things that escape language. Lyotard applies this idea to Auschwitz in his *The Differend* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Traumas like the Holocaust create a Void that is a tear in reality. Though it cannot be seen with the naked eye, it exerts an enormous gravitational pull all around it, and it remains a brute theological fact we ignore at our own peril.²⁶

To better grasp Rav Shagar's conception of the Void as a way of understanding trauma, it is helpful to turn to the thought of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, a frequent touchstone for him.²⁷ Like R. Nahman, Lacan asserts that our world is shaped first and foremost by language, or what he calls the symbolic order, which functions as a collection of concepts, rules, and norms that structure our world and allow us to locate ourselves within it.²⁸ A human being cannot live without it because it provides us with the identity and the values that orient our lives. Furthermore, like R. Nahman, Lacan is particularly sensitive to the way in which language fails, when things stop making sense. As Todd McGowan, a Lacanian scholar, describes it:

Even though the symbolic order provides the background for all interactions, it cannot account for everything. There are always gaps and fissures, points at which language cannot signify. Its failure is not the contingent failure of a particular symbolic order, but a necessary failure inhering to symbolization itself.²⁹

The failures, paradoxes, and contradictions of language indicate what Lacan calls the "real," points of impossibility that mark where the symbolic order cannot be made whole.³⁰ However, the real is not to be seen as the enemy of language but that which sustains it. Just as R. Nahman sees the Void as necessary for creation, so too Lacan sees contradiction and paradox as essential to the symbolic order's continued function. If the meaning of language was completely fixed and could grasp all there is, there would be no place for human freedom. However, because the symbolic order is riven with contradictions, the meaning of language is never closed.

26 Dreyfus records that Shagar went so far as to describe the Yom Kippur War as "like a Shoah for our generation." See *Negot bi-Sfat ha-Lev*, 161.

27 Lacan plays an important role in Shagar's thought by way of Slavoj Žižek and Eric L. Santner. For example, see *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 21–40, 173–192.

28 On the similarity between Lacan's understanding of language and that of Jewish mysticism, see Tzahi Weiss, "On the Matter of Language: The Creation of the World from Letters and Jacques Lacan's Perception of Letters as Real," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 17:1 (2009), 101–115.

29 Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

30 According to Lacan, the real is "that which resists symbolization absolutely" and is best understood as "the impossible." For more on this, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1996), 186–187.

Take, for example, the famous barber paradox. It proposes the theoretical case of a town in which a barber shaves all men who do not shave themselves. However, the question soon arises as to who shaves the barber? If the barber does not shave himself, he cannot be the barber who shaves all men who do not shave themselves, and the same is true in reverse. The existence of this paradox and others like it, Lacan argues, reveal the fault lines in the symbolic order, thereby showing it cannot solve all the problems produced by the combination of language and logic. As a result, questions without answers inevitably remain, and encountering them is often deeply unsettling. As McGowan further explains:

When we think about the barber paradox, perhaps our head begins to hurt, but it doesn't seem inherently traumatic. Nonetheless, it should. All trauma has its basis in the logical impasses of the symbolic order like that of the barber paradox. The inability of the symbolic order to make sense of everything that it produces is traumatic. Trauma is the failure of sense—the encounter with non-sense.³¹

If Freud believed trauma occurs when the psyche is overloaded by what it cannot make sense of, Lacan and R. Nahman help show how these experiences are inherent to language, both religious and secular, that shapes our world. To experience trauma is to confront the limits of language, the points of impossibility that Lacan called the real, which defy our ability to put them into words.³² While language can provide concepts for innumerable things, there always exists that which is too much for it.

Redemption promises many things but cannot solve the problem of trauma, as even R. Nahman himself made clear. His famous teaching of the Void first appears as an interpretation of God's directive to Moses that he must go to Pharaoh, and ask for the Jewish people's freedom. Pharaoh's refusal to listen to Moses and his inability to recognize God's miracles is a manifestation of the Void. Even as redemption unfolds, one cannot deny the Void's enduring existence. To account for it, Rav Shagar would have to rethink his relationship to God and the Torah.

31 Ibid.

32 As explained by Yehuda Israely, "An event is traumatic if it rends the fragile texture of the Symbolic order. Exposure to the reality of a body maimed in a road accident reveals the virtuality of the Symbolic reality. Fundamental notions about human beings—that they have stable and enduring external form, a face, a name, characteristics, a role—collapse. Medics and emergency teams have an extensive symbolic repertoire (concept, roles) to protect them against the experience of meaninglessness associated with trauma." See Israely, *Lacanian Treatment: Psychoanalysis for Clinicians* (Routledge, 2018), 67.

The Scars of Torah

In the early years of psychoanalysis, Freud believed hypnosis would allow patients to relive repressed memories and achieve catharsis, a redemption of sorts that would alleviate their symptoms. Though this worked for a time, Freud soon discovered that much of his success was wishful thinking. Patients would claim they were cured only to soon relapse. In response, Freud developed a new approach dubbed the “talking cure.” Patients were encouraged to speak about anything and everything that came to mind, with the purpose of finding those things they could not speak about, the scars on their psyches. To the difficult task of revealing one’s trauma and confronting it, Freud gave the name “working-through.” It required the patient to “find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his illness... [It] must no longer seem to him contemptible, but must become ... a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have to be derived.”³³ The goal of working-through was not necessarily to bring about a total recovery but to confront one’s traumas and learn how to live even while continuing to feel their effects.

In his own way, Rav Shagar saw himself undergoing a similar process after the war, as illustrated by a fascinating story told by R. Elhanan Nir, one of his prominent students. When Nir first began studying with him, he was heavily discouraged by his former teachers, who had only harsh words for Rav Shagar and his method of study.³⁴ Uncertain as to whether he should continue, Nir asked Shagar why others disparaged him in this way. Before responding, Rav Shagar paused for a moment to look at the scars on his arms from his war injuries, which served as permanent reminders of the terrible pain he bore on his body and in his soul. He then said the following:

I was wounded in battle of Nafah at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War and I was in the hospital for many months. I was wrapped in bandages and wounded. There I understood that the Torah is wrapped in bandages, covered in infinite wrappings, and that it, like me, needed to emerge from its bandages and constraints. Since then I go about with this awareness in all that

33 Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Trans. and ed. James Strachey*, vol. 12 (London, 1955), 152.

34 For more on Rav Shagar’s unique, but sometimes controversial method of Gemara study, see Yair Dreyfuss, “Torah Study for Contemporary Times: Conservatism or Revolution?,” *TRADITION* 45:2 (2012), 31–47.

I learn and teach: to take the Torah out of its bandages and expose it to the sunlight.³⁵

While we do not normally think of the Torah as covered in bandages, the Zohar states that it is to be thought of as wrapped in garments.³⁶ Why is this? Because there is a danger in seeing the Torah as made up of just stories and ordinary words rather than as divine. Therefore, one must look at the Torah's words as only outer garments that draw one to search for the divine secrets they conceal. Yet, in Rav Shagar's parable, the Torah is not wrapped in garments that hide secrets but in bandages that cover scars. What could this possibly mean?

We can perhaps again find the answer in the teachings of R. Nahman, who explained that the Void is caused not only by the paradox of creation but also by *mahloket*, the disagreements of Torah scholars.³⁷ Though the arguments of the rabbis may not seem as radical as the mysteries of creation, R. Nahman saw them as indicative of a problem no less serious. The reason Torah scholars cannot agree is because the meaning of Torah is always ambiguous. Instead of a Torah with a fixed meaning, we have received a Torah from God whose meaning is never set in stone, one in which the gates of interpretation are always open.³⁸

While this cherished idea is often pointed to as what makes the Torah beautiful, R. Nahman understood it can also be profoundly unnerving, even traumatizing. *Mahloket* reveals the inherent ambiguity of the Torah and reminds us we can never be certain of God's will or God's ways. While this may not bother us most of the time, moments inevitably arise when we are desperate for answers to our most deeply held religious questions, and yet we cannot find them. Instead, all we can see are the Torah's scars, its lack of fixed meaning, the cracks in which the Void starts to break through. To prevent this from happening, we have no choice but to wrap the Torah in bandages and impose unequivocal meanings on it to keep the Void at bay. Rav Shagar came to realize that these bandages may conceal the Torah's scars, but if wrapped too tight and for too long, the

35 Elhanan Nir, "Be-Tzel ha-Emuna." Nir also recognizes the importance of Shagar's parable when he writes, "This was his life project: not only to prevent the hardening of religiosity but to renew the Torah; to reach 'the unique truth of Torah for our generation.'"

36 Zohar 3:152a.

37 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:4. For more on Rav Shagar's presentation of *mahloket* in R. Nahman's thought see *Luhot ve-Shivrei Luchot* (Yediot Sefarim, 2013), 383–406.

38 See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:25, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago, 1963), 327–328. R. Nahman describes this as *tzerufim hadashim*, the ability for the letters of the Torah to be combined in new ways. For examples, see *Likkutei Moharan* I 36, 281, and II 8.

Torah becomes mummified, better left in an Egyptian sarcophagus more dead than alive.

For Rav Shagar, this was unacceptable. As he saw it, a Jew remains bound to God through their love of the Torah, and without this, the covenant between God and the Jewish people cannot be sustained.³⁹ Our love, he argued, demands a living Torah even if that means revealing its scars. While this can be painful, it need not turn the Torah into something ugly and repellant. Quite the contrary. It can help show what makes it so beloved to us. To better understand how this might be possible, it is helpful to see the words of the German Jewish philosopher Moses Hess (1812–1875). When asked whether sacrifices should be a part of the Jewish people’s redeemed future, Hess admitted his discomfort with the idea. Like most modern people, he recoiled at the thought of slaughtering animals to serve God. However, Hess argued he was unwilling to dismiss animal sacrifices entirely, for his love for Judaism compelled him to be open to them even as he found them troublesome. He explains it in the following manner:

The scar on the face of my beloved does not detract from my love for her, but is itself dear to me; dearer, perhaps, than her beautiful eyes, for other women may have beautiful eyes, but the scar is characteristic only of my beloved’s individuality.⁴⁰

While we may typically see a scar on another’s face as disfiguring, Hess argues it is what marks the beloved as different from all others. Though her eyes can be compared to those of other women, the scar is uniquely her’s. Rather than diminish her beauty, it is what makes her singular. For Rav Shagar, the challenge of religious life is to recognize that our love for the Torah is no different. We love it not in spite of its scars but in part because of them. Though the Torah’s ambiguity may at times be traumatic. It is also the source of the enigma that draws us to it. As R. Nahman states, our love for the Torah is “a fulfillment of ‘I am lovesick.’”⁴¹ We feel bound to it even when it doesn’t make sense and even when it might be painful for us.

39 E.g., *Be-Torato Yehege*, 25–37. This was the reason why Hazal viewed their relationship to the Torah in romantic or even erotic terms. For just a few examples, see *Eruvin* 54a, *Sanhedrin* 99b, and *Midrash Shemuel* 1, s.v. *et la’asot*. In fact, Rav Shagar’s own life is a testament to this. By dedicating himself to the studying and teaching Torah after the war, he embodied the verse “were your Torah not my delight, I would have perished in my misery” (Psalms 119:92).

40 Moshe Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem: A Study in Jewish Nationalism* (Anodos, 2019), 65.

41 *Likkutei Moharan* I 31:6 quoting Song of Songs 2:5. For Rav Shagar’s analysis of this passage, see *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 2, 409–411.

Once again, psychoanalysis can help us make sense of this. According to Lacan, the process of working-through removes the bandages of repression we have placed around our trauma. However, this long, difficult task, is made harder by the fact that revealing our trauma comes with no guarantee of a cure. If anything, it can lead to the realization that the narratives we have long used to make sense of the world promise more than they can deliver. Yet, according to Lacan, the process of working-through does not end here, for even as trauma takes so much away, something always remains. The goal of analysis is to help us understand that our deepest attachments always exceed our ability to make sense of them, and therefore, they persist even in the face of trauma. Logic and reason can rarely, if ever, account for those things that matter most to us. In the words of Yehuda Israely, a Lacanian clinician, psychoanalysis leads us to see how a “desire exists in us and that it, rather than our idealized self-perception, is what determines us.”⁴² Because we are committed to seeing ourselves as fully in control, most of our lives are spent avoiding this realization. But we see this most clearly with those we love. We feel bound to them even when we cannot understand why, for even after their deaths, our love for them remains and can give meaning to our entire existence. In this sense, it is correct to call love a sickness, for embracing love means we must at times be willing, as Israely says, “to observe where our feet are taking us in order thus to understand where we want to go.”⁴³ For Rav Shagar, our love for the Torah and for God requires nothing less.

The Shade of Faith

Thirty years after the war, at a memorial event for Shaya and Shmuel, Rav Shagar offered a new interpretation of his faith. If decades before he had said that his faith had darkness in it, at this 2003 gathering just days before Sukkot, he drew from the holiday’s symbolism to find words that could describe how he felt. He noted that according to the Zohar, dwelling in the *sukka* is an experience of *tzela de-mehemnuta*, the shade of faith.⁴⁴ It is to sit with the divine clouds of glory, just a few feet above one’s head. But this is often not enough to fully satisfy us, for “we dwell in the shade of the *sukka* and not its light.”⁴⁵ The *sukka* can provide shade but little else, and though Isaiah states that “the *sukka* shall serve as shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain” (4:6), this refers

42 Israely, *Lacanian Treatment*, 90.

43 Ibid.

44 Zohar 3:103a.

45 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 108.

only to the days of the messiah. In this world, a *sukka* is little more than three walls. It is a flimsy structure, not a fortress.

One thinks that the *sukka*, which is called faith and trust in God, protects him on a physical level. However, a person sees with his eyes that a *sukka* does not protect us in the reality of our lives. . . . The divine providence we all believe exists in the world is like shade and not like light The relationship to war is not just a relationship to pain, rather it is also a relationship to *hester panim* (the hiding of God's face), of questions, of shade—the shade of faith.⁴⁶

If faith guaranteed us security and happiness, we would easily live a happy life. We would be protected from any traumas we might encounter, confident we have answers to any question that might emerge. But faith is unable to offer us these things, for like a *sukka* it cannot even protect us from the rain. Why then would one want to have anything to do with it? What possible reason could there be to dwell in the shade of faith? For Rav Shagar, the answer is to be found in Song of Songs, a tale of two lovers, and to make his point, he cites the verse, “Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, I delight to sit in his shade” (2:3). While we might think it enjoyable to sit under the apple tree, the *midrash* disagrees and explains it provides little comfort when the sun begins to blaze. Why is this?

Because it has no shade to sit in. So too it was the case when the nations of the world fled from dwelling in the shade of Holy One Blessed Be He on the day of the giving of the Torah. Is this true also about Israel? The Torah says: “I delight to sit in his shade.” I delight in it and dwell in it. It is I who delight in it and not the nations.⁴⁷

When the temperature increases, those with better sense find their way indoors, and to the nations of the world, the Jews look foolish roasting in the heat. Why would Jews hold on to their faith and remain in the hot sun when there are more comfortable places to be? That they do so hardly makes them a “wise and discerning nation” in the eyes of the world. Yet their faith remains because they “delight to sit in His shade,” whatever little there may be. To love another is to be drawn to them, unable to imagine a life without them. What makes loves sublime is that it enables us to bear our trauma, to sit in the *sukka* or under the apple tree

46 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, Ibid.

47 *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 2:10. While Shagar doesn't mention it, the *midrash* clearly draws on *Avoda Zara* 3a–b that non-Jews reject the mitzva of *sukka* when it gets too hot.

despite the heat. Our faith may have darkness in it, and our Torah may have scars, but we still yearn to dwell in God's shade.

Embracing Trauma, Finding Faith

One of the great tragedies of religious life is that it is too often the case that faith is used to repress trauma, rather than make a space for it. In doing so, it only ensures that one can never quite escape it. Rav Shagar spent his life struggling to envision an alternative by dedicating himself to working-through the traumas of the Yom Kippur War. For some, the results of his efforts will always appear lacking, but that is partly because he cannot offer what they are looking for. Like Moses and Rabbi Akiva before him, Rav Shagar believed that redemption would come, but that day has not yet arrived.⁴⁸ Until then, Jews will have to learn to live with their traumas, whether it be the marks of Egyptian whips on their backs, tattooed numbers on their arms, or the scars from an exploding tank. They will have to accept that some questions have no answers, but that faith, nevertheless, still remains.

48 For more on Rav Shagar's complex relationship to redemption, see Levi Morrow, "Redemption Deferred: Rav Shagar's Post-Kookian Political Theology of the Future," *Proceedings of the 2020 Bar-Ilan University Conference on the Thought of Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg*, ed. Miriam Feldmann Kaye (forthcoming). Also see Zachary Truboff, *Torah Goes Forth From Zion*, 205–220.